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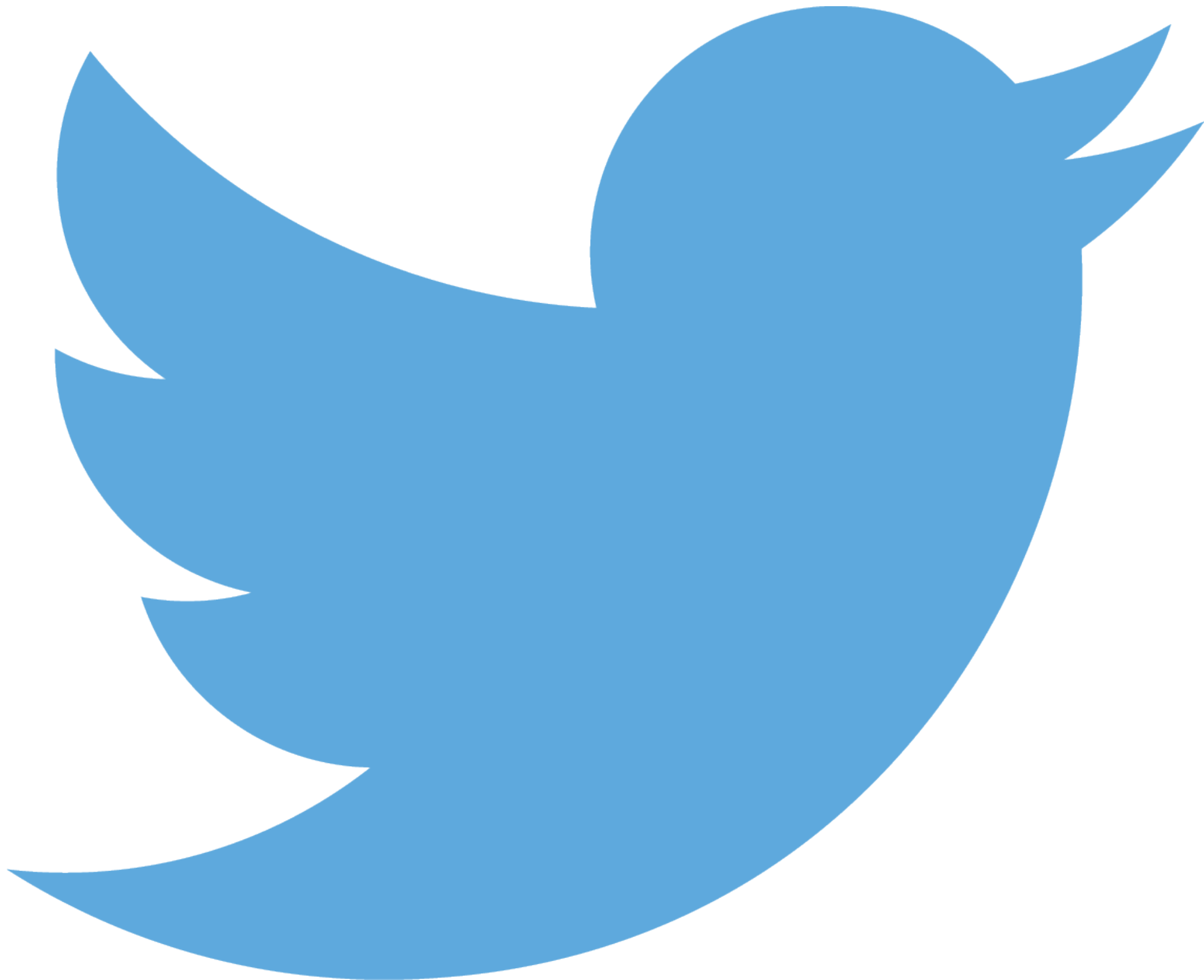
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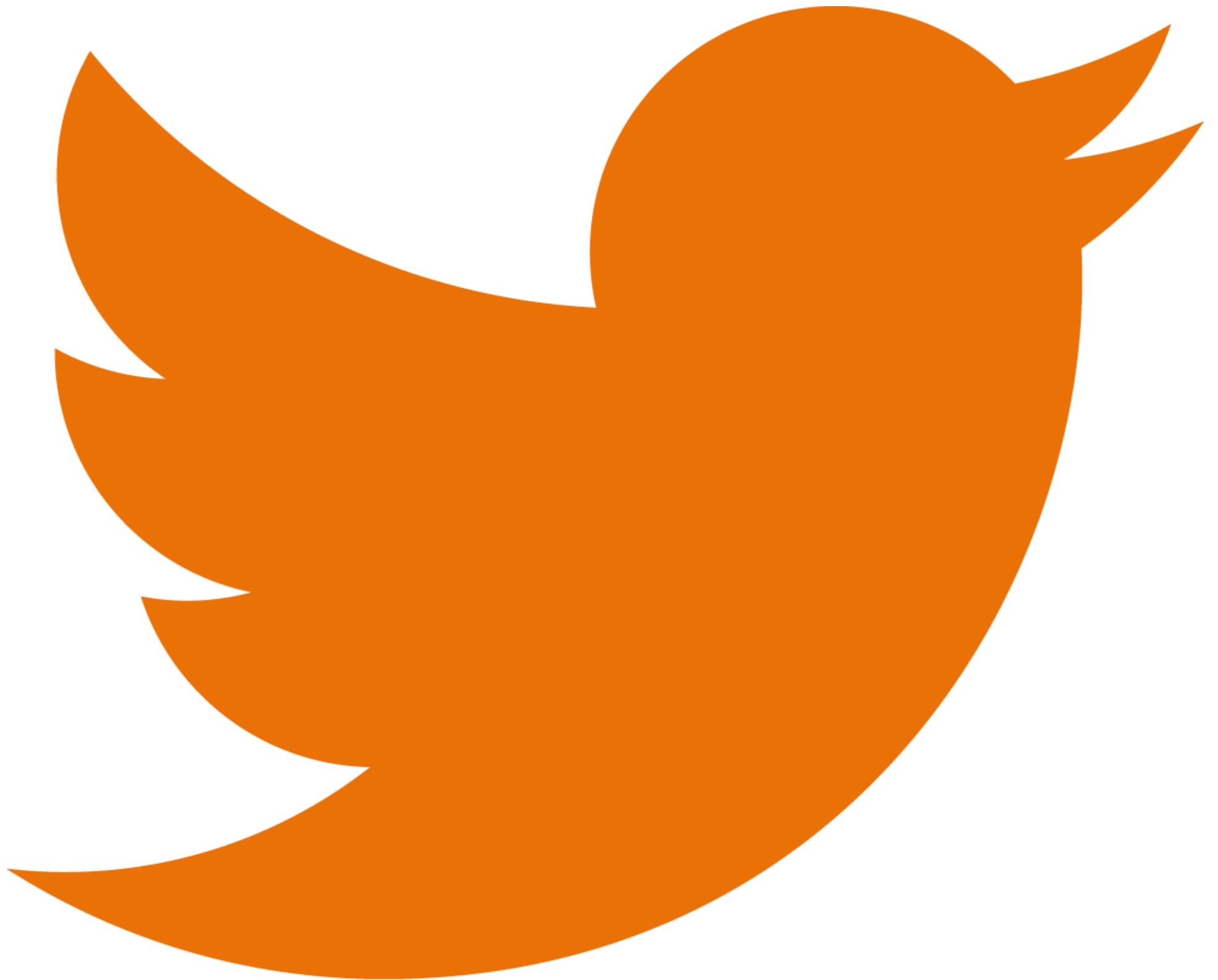
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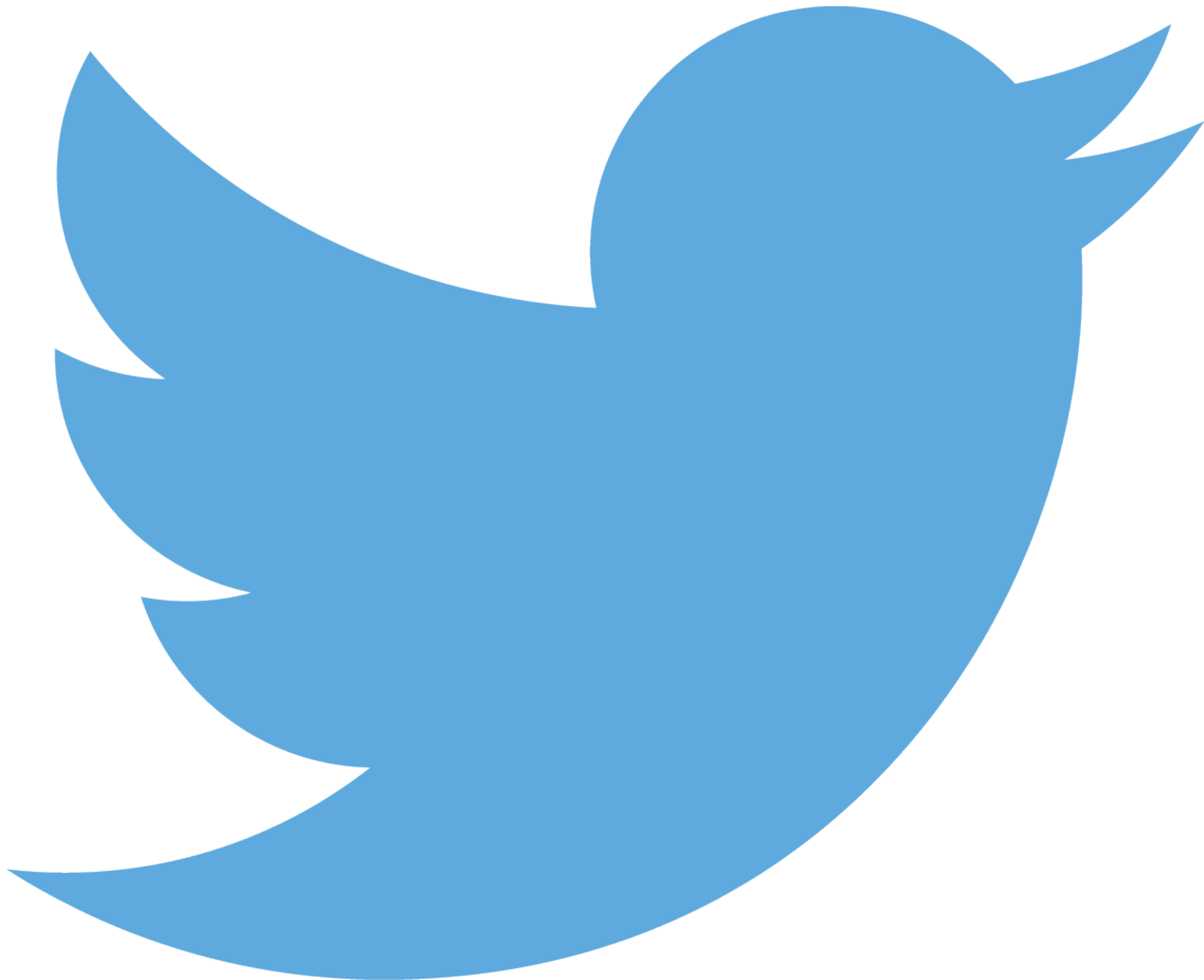
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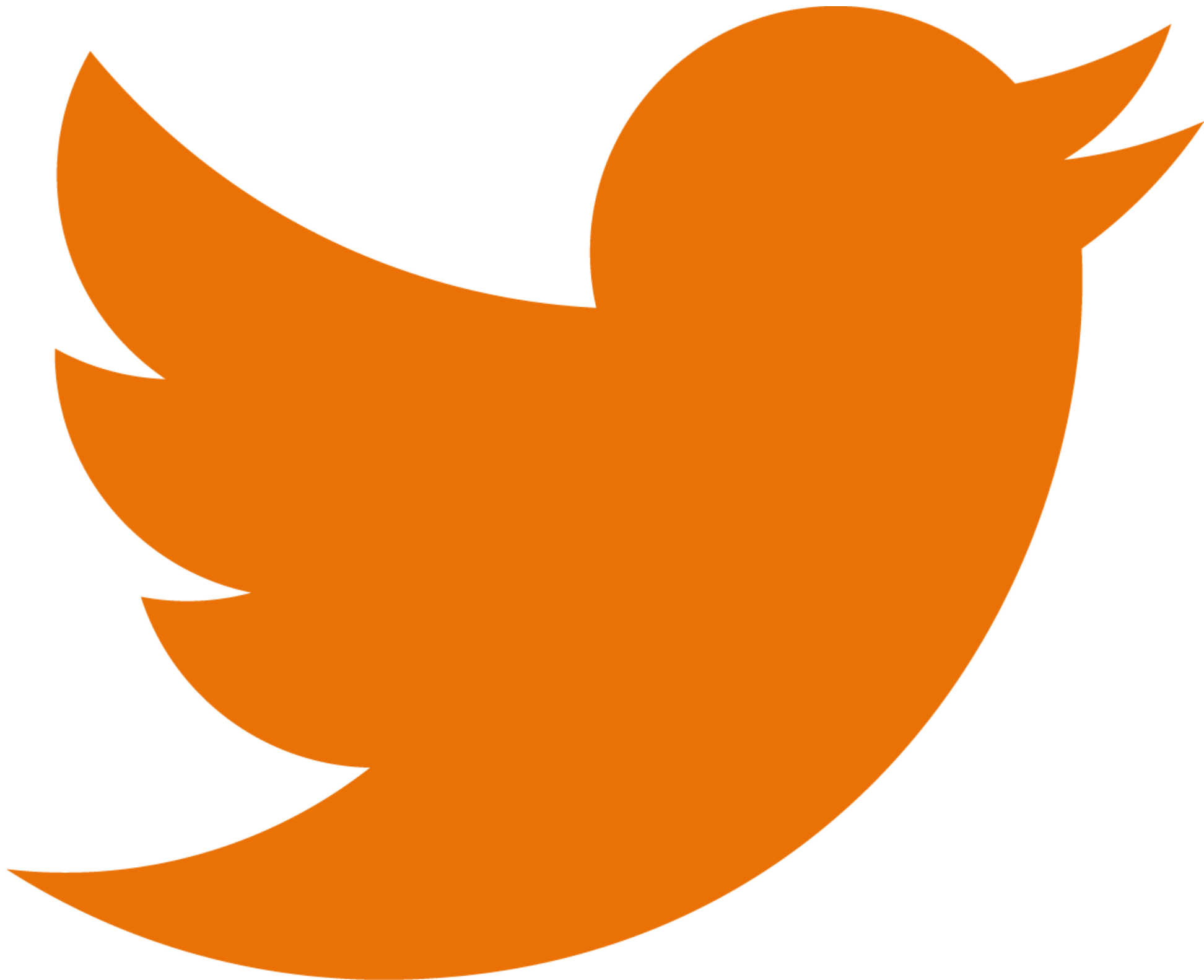






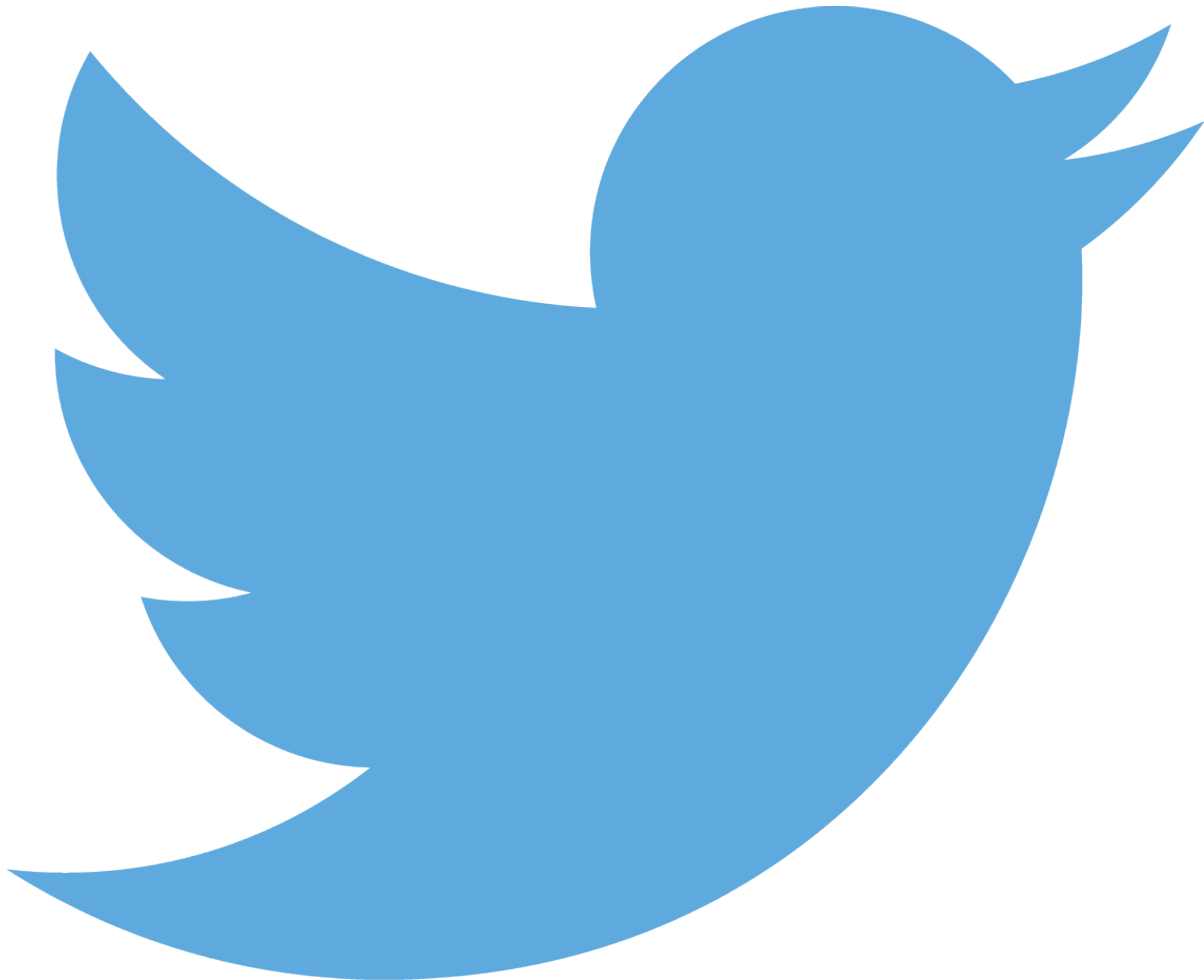


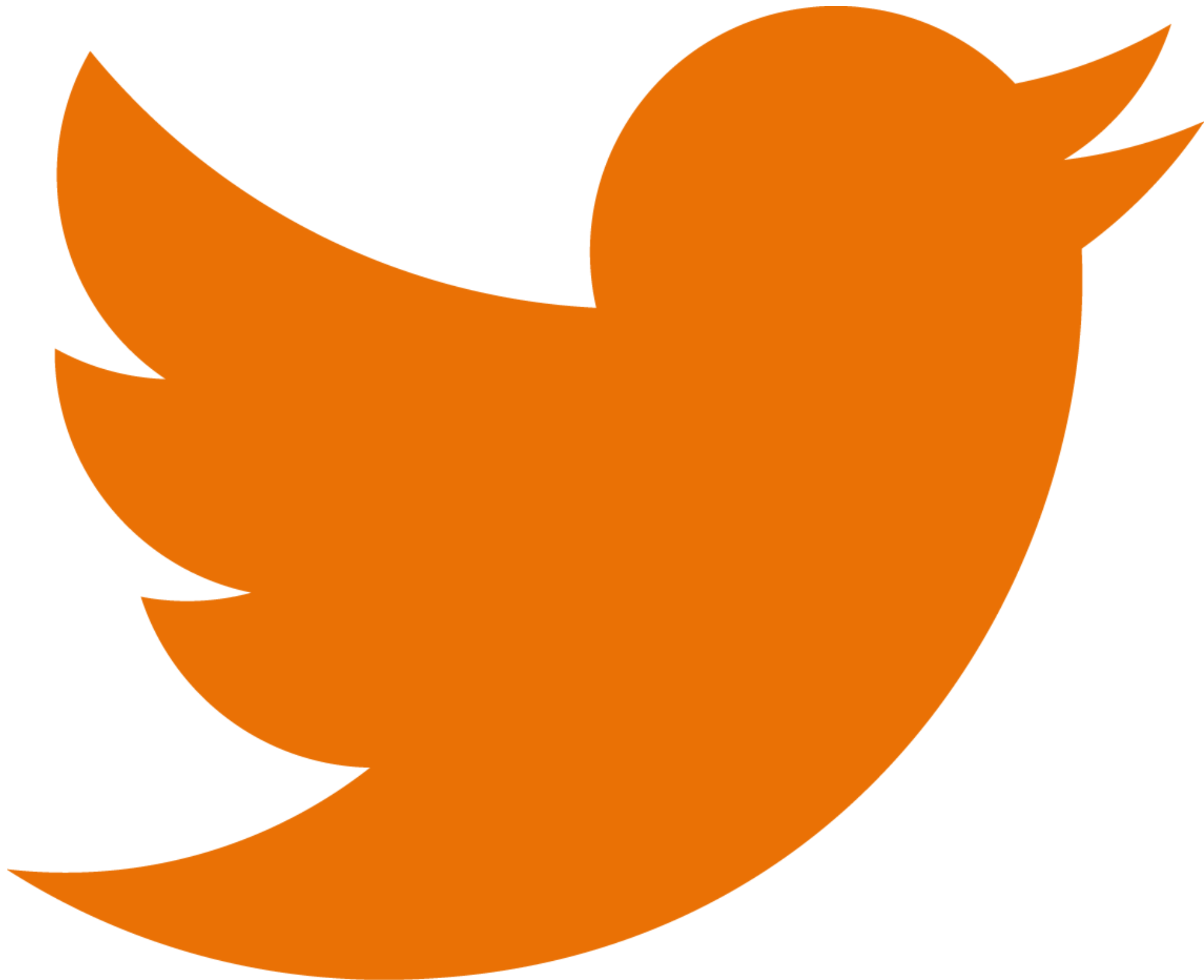




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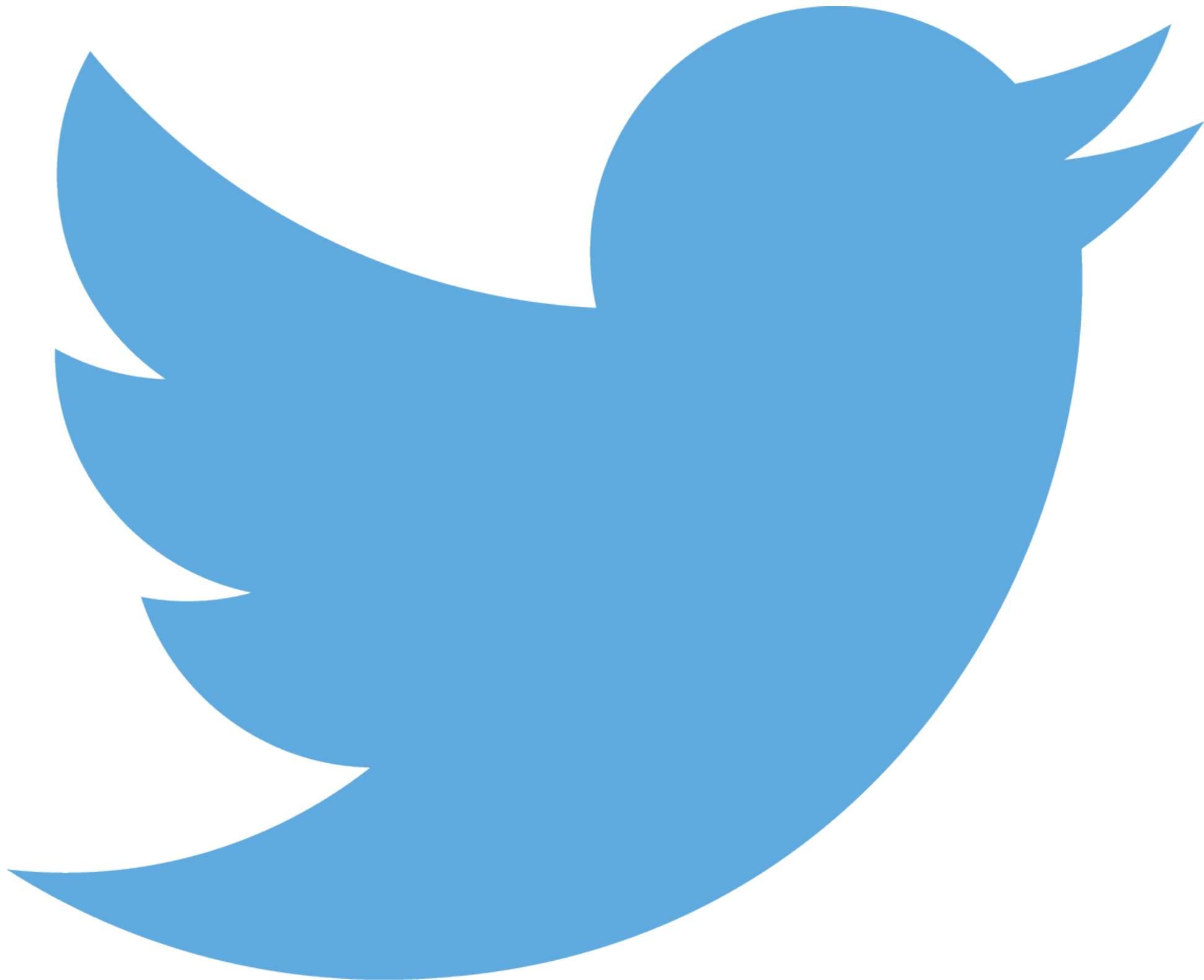




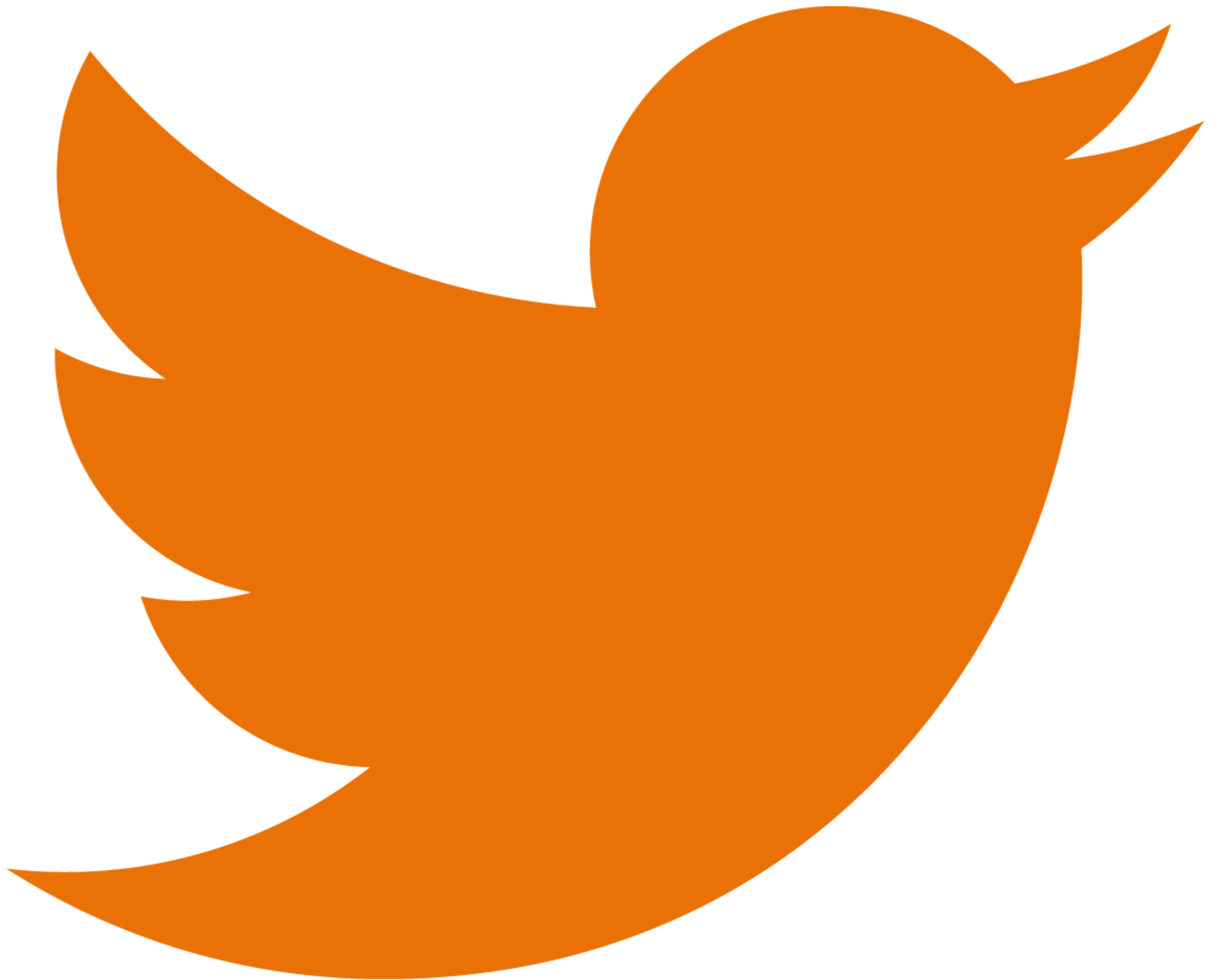
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### Cleanup at a Superfund site

In the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, we learned that Harris County, Texas, where Houston is located, is home to 13 abandoned industrial sites so populated by toxic waste that over the years they've been assigned Superfund cleanup status by the Environmental Protection Agency. We also [learned](#) from the work of two Associated Press reporters that seven of those sites had flooded and that the EPA and Texas Commission on Environmental Quality had not yet visited them on Sept. 3 to see if Harvey had caused a release of toxins from the holding areas built to contain them until they can be cleaned up.

That brought an extraordinary rebuke that amounted to a tantrum from the EPA, blasting the AP's Michael Biesecker for "misleading" reporting. The EPA said it had not yet been able to get to the sites because of the flooding even though the two reporters had managed to do so by boat, car, or on foot. Subsequently, on Sept. 6, it was announced that the two agencies had completed their initial inspections of almost all the sites. Full reports have yet to be issued, but apparently there have been no leaks.

At The Atlantic, staff writer and Daily Kos alum Van Newkirk II, [wrote a lengthy and pointed look](#) not just at the issue of toxic release from Harvey, but also from hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Sandy, all of which disrupted toxic sites. Biesecker and Jason Dearen at the AP [wrote](#) Saturday that Superfund sites were in the path of Hurricane Irma, too. Nothing announced yet about leaks at any of those. Here's Newkirk:

Still, word that no major leaks have been reported may be little comfort to local communities, which already have to plan for low-level contamination incidents and



the risk of further contamination thanks to regular (albeit more mundane) flooding in the area. Many of those communities tend to fall into TEJAS's "environmental justice" category; marginalized by race, income, or both, they face the greatest dangers from contamination and the longest road to recovery.

Superfund sites aren't the only polluted zones affected by Harvey. There are several Resource Conservation and Recovery Act-managed areas—active dumping or waste sites being managed by the EPA—around Houston, too. But Superfund sites contain some of the worst hazards—old plants and dumps that operated before the EPA's rules were in place—the mitigation of which requires federal oversight and funding. Environmentalists told me after Harvey that the agency may not be up to the task, and that its readiness is in decline.

It was nearly 40 years ago, in the wake of the discovery of environmental and health issues at a 20,000-ton dump of mixed toxic chemicals in a Niagara Falls, New York, neighborhood near [Love Canal](#) that Superfund got its start. Hundreds of families had to be evacuated, with an emphasis on mostly lower middle-class white homeowners instead of the mostly poor white and African American renters in nearby projects. In 1980, Congress passed the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation & Liability Act, Superfund for short.

Under the law, companies currently in business were required to clean up any hazardous waste contaminants on their sites, even if they no longer operated them. But since some of those sites were poisoned as much as a century ago, it's not always possible to find out who did the poisoning. So for cases in which the company responsible for the contamination had gone out of business or when responsibility couldn't be established, a small tax was placed on chemical and petroleum companies to cover cleanup costs of "orphan sites."

Within two decades, 1,000 sites had been named. Since then, more keep being added, with the total now at 1,342 on the [National Priorities List](#), with nearly 1,200 having completed their decontamination. Forty-six more sites are on a recommended list to join those. But about half of the 406 original Superfund sites named more than a quarter of a century or more ago still await action.

One reason for that is that there's not always an easy fix, but the bigger problem is money. As usual, industry [objected to the Superfund tax](#) and Republicans (with a small cohort of go-along Democrats) repealed it in 1995. So who pays to clean up orphan sites now? Taxpayers. And in those instances when the responsible company is still around, it's often the polluter vs. the victims when clean-up is demanded, the former (together with their state legislative puppets) pushing a cheap option, the latter advocating for something that actually does the job.

A study by the EPA in 2015 [found](#) that 17 percent of the U.S. population—53 million people—lives within three miles of a Superfund site. Of that total, 46 percent are people of color. In New Jersey, the state with the most Superfund sites, 114, it's 50 percent of the state's population that lives within three miles of a site.

EPA chief Scott Pruitt [said](#) in May that Superfund clean-ups "will be restored to their rightful place at the center of the agency's core mission." In a statement, he noted, "We will be more hands-on to ensure proper oversight and attention to the Superfund program at the highest levels of the agency, and to create consistency across states."

That sounds great. And it's utterly bogus.

It should not be forgotten that Pruitt has proposed axing 31 percent of the EPA's budget, including \$330 million from the Superfund budget, a budget that's already been cut from from 1999 to 2013 from \$2 billion a year to \$1.1 billion. And that 45 percent reduction doesn't include the loss of purchasing power from inflation.

Scott Slesinger at the Natural Resources Defense Council notes that there's more than a truncated budget at issue. For one thing, Pruitt's approach ignores the people whom these toxic sites most affect—the people who live nearby—in favor of investors and companies. And then there is the [memo](#) in which he takes away control from regional EPA administrators and staff experts in the Office of Land and Emergency Management and assigns authority for okaying all cleanups over \$50 million to himself:

This is a terrible idea for several reasons. Superfund cleanup final decisions were made in the Administrator's office when Superfund was first implemented by the Reagan Administration. In the aftermath of scandals that required the Administrator to resign and the Assistant Administrator of the Superfund program to go to jail, in 1984, this authority was delegated to the EPA Regions.

Now Scott Pruitt wants to return to the "good old days" of scandal and have the Administrator of EPA once again make these decisions. What is wrong with delegation to regional managers where the sites are located? Is he afraid clean ups will cost industry more if he doesn't have the last say? The rest of the memo makes it clear: he wants everyone at EPA to know that quicker and cheaper is the preferred alternative to better and safer a plan that puts the polluters before the public.

Yet another example of Pruitt working hard to make the EPA an enemy of the environment and environmental justice.

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[hester](#)

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I know someone in Houston who lost her house and ...

I know someone in Houston who lost her house and car to Harvey. She has zero, zip, zilch trust in what “officials” tell her about hazards as a result of Harvey. When one of the chemical plants near the ship channel (where she works) exploded and she was told the ‘smoke coming from the plant was not toxic” she believed not one word.

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[kaleidoscope](#)

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And the real kicker is that for every official S ...

And the real kicker is that for every official Superfund site, there are at least ten sites that should be but aren't.

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[RiveroftheWest](#)

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Pruitt is a disaster, and the EPA under his dire ...

Pruitt is a disaster, and the EPA under his direction will be too. The welfare of citizens is the last thing on his priority list.

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[weezilgirl](#) [RiveroftheWest](#)

[Sep 14 · 06:52:50 PM](#)

I am very sorry Pruitt got the appointment. We, ...

I am very sorry Pruitt got the appointment. We, here in Oklahoma, watched him turn the office of Attorney General into a bully pulpit for extremely dangerous right ideas. He isnt missed here and he is far more dangerous in Washington

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[skatenerd](#)

[Sep 12 · 05:30:32 PM](#)

This is a really tragic instance of how segregat ...

This is a really tragic instance of how segregation (already a Very Bad Thing) can snowball into really extreme problems.

This stuff isn't "on purpose" in the sense that 1 person made a plan that said "poor and underrepresented people should get poisoned in a flood!", but it *is* "on purpose" in the sense that this is a real pattern that happens repeatedly, from which certain people profit, and there's not enough political will to fix it.

Reminds me of this tweet:

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[CharlesII skatenerd](#)

[Sep 14 · 12:24:23 PM](#)

... ..

...

5. Make a show of pithy relief contributions to avoid conversation on wealth inequality

...



Did I miss anything?

Well, yeah. This, from Sandra Gonzalez at CNN:

Hurricane Harvey devastated Texas and Louisiana over a 6-day period, with losses [estimated](#) to be as much as \$75 billion.

...

At the close of the show, Billy Crystal put the total raised at more than \$14 million, with that number expected to climb. The special will air on a delay on the west coast.

So, change “pithy” to “pitiful.”

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[rflctammt](#)

[Sep 14 · 09:50:42 AM](#)

Thanks, MB. These are the stories that need to be [...](#)

Thanks, MB. These are the stories that need to be on the front pages and hung in the post offices and libraries of every city on every coast with starred maps of every official Superfund site, (AND the sites that should be considered Superfund sites but aren't.)

Reminds me of those movies *Erin Brockovich* and *A Civil Action*. What is yet to come...

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[kosta](#)  
[Sep 14 · 10:42:07 AM](#)

Great piece.

Great piece.

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[Sep 14 · 11:13:24 AM](#)

Excellent post, MB. ...

Excellent post, MB.

I'm sickened beyond description by Pruitt's—and, by extension, Trump's —appalling lack of concern for Earth's environment. Ultimately, it's not man-made constructs that matters most to us. It's not jobs, it's not commerce, it's not immigration, it's not even war that we should be most concerned about. Rather, our primary concern should be our species' ability to sustain itself indefinitely on this planet. Yet the Trump administration ignores—worse, *denies*—the ongoing catastrophe of industrial pollution and warming.

If we significantly diminish the ability of our planet to support life (which it certainly seems we're doing), we too will succumb to the ensuing devastation. For we are animals, no less a product of nature than any other life form. Technology and national wealth will do us little good when one day we find ourselves drowning alongside countless other species in a hot, toxic stew. A stew, tragically, of our own making.

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[Sep 14 · 07:03:51 PM](#)

If I think about it in a physical way, I can see ...

If I think about it in a physical way, I can see a disconnect from 45 and mother earth. He may go a week without stepping on the ground.

I live in the country and the earth is truly my home. Hardly an hour goes by that I am not thinking of improvements. 1. Move the butterfly bush because it needs more sun. 2. Call Lowell and tell him you will help him pen calves. 3. Tie bright ribbons around wildflowers that you want seeds from. It never ends.

Just because 45 has a total disconnect from all reality, doesn't mean he is no less a steward for the earth. He should have the health of our mother earth in mind. Until he follows me and steps into some cow shit, it won't matter to him how she gets along.

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[Arfeeto weezilgirl](#)

[Sep 15 · 06:30:31 AM](#)

I concur, for what it's worth, Weezilgirl. ...

I concur, for what it's worth, Weezilgirl.

In my early college days—back when the earth was still considered flat!—I majored in biology and minored in philosophy. Ever since, I've been a close observer of nature, inexhaustibly amazed by the richness and diversity of species on Earth. I've also thought, daily, about how we humans perceive reality, continually questioning the extent of our knowledge and the validity of our presuppositions. Indeed, every single day, I've pondered what it means to be a human animal living on this planet, in this solar system, in this universe.

Such outward thoughts have never occurred to most, including our president. Regardless of their educational level, they choose to focus on self-enrichment—acquiring money and the things it buys. It is this arrogance in the face of nature, this willful ignorance about our true place in Earth's ecosystem, I believe, that portends a tragic end for our species.

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[CharlesII](#)

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Regarding the photo, it's actually a myth that a ...

Regarding the photo, it's actually a myth that a lab coat will protect you from chemical spills. Though it does have the power to transform you into a doctor on TV.

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[CADeminVA](#)

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In a civilized society, this would be treated as ...

In a civilized society, this would be treated as a humanitarian crisis of the first order.

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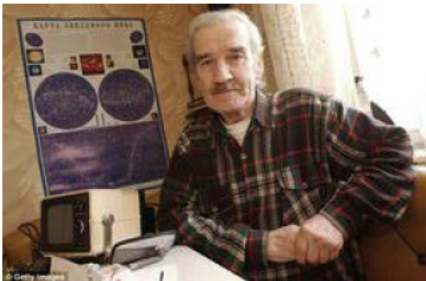
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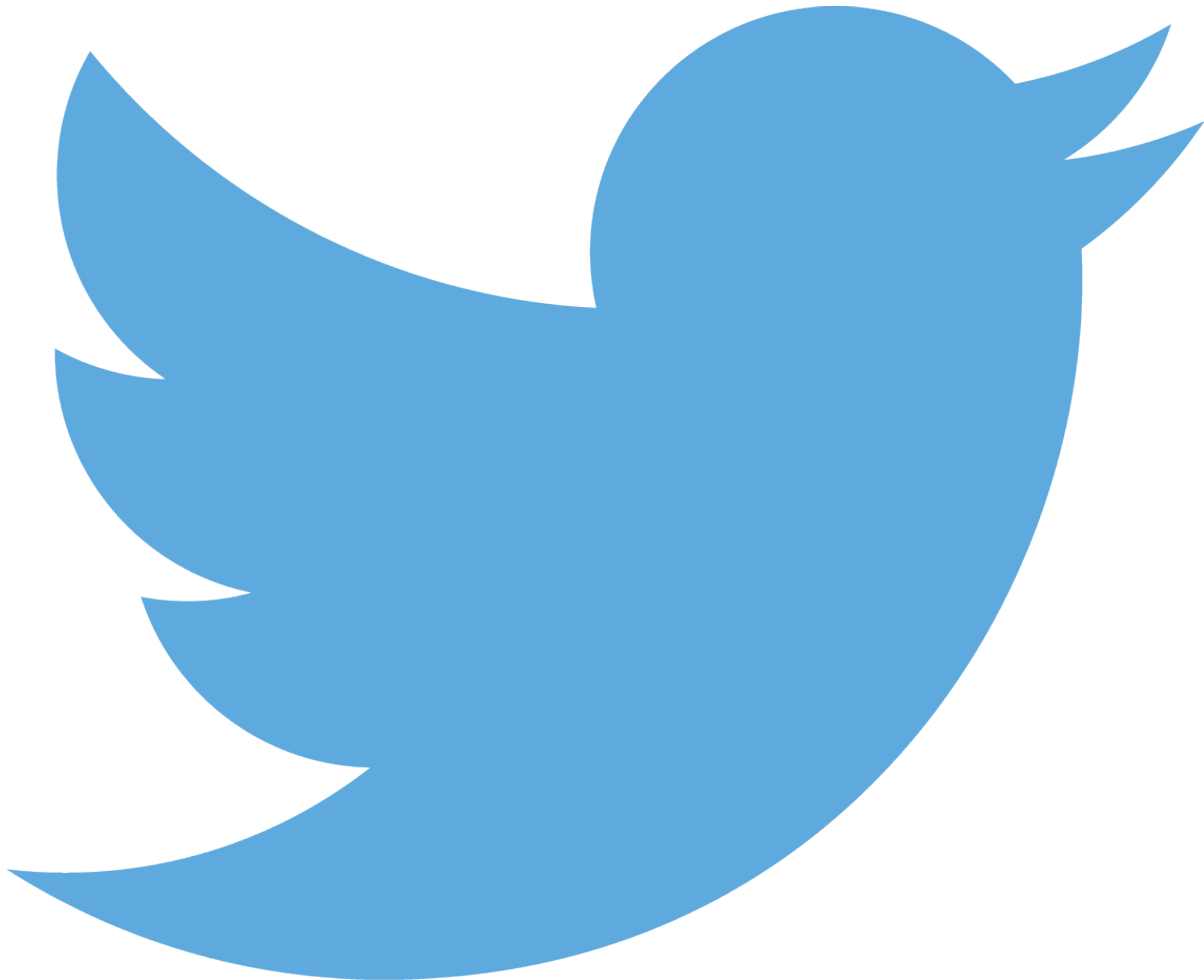
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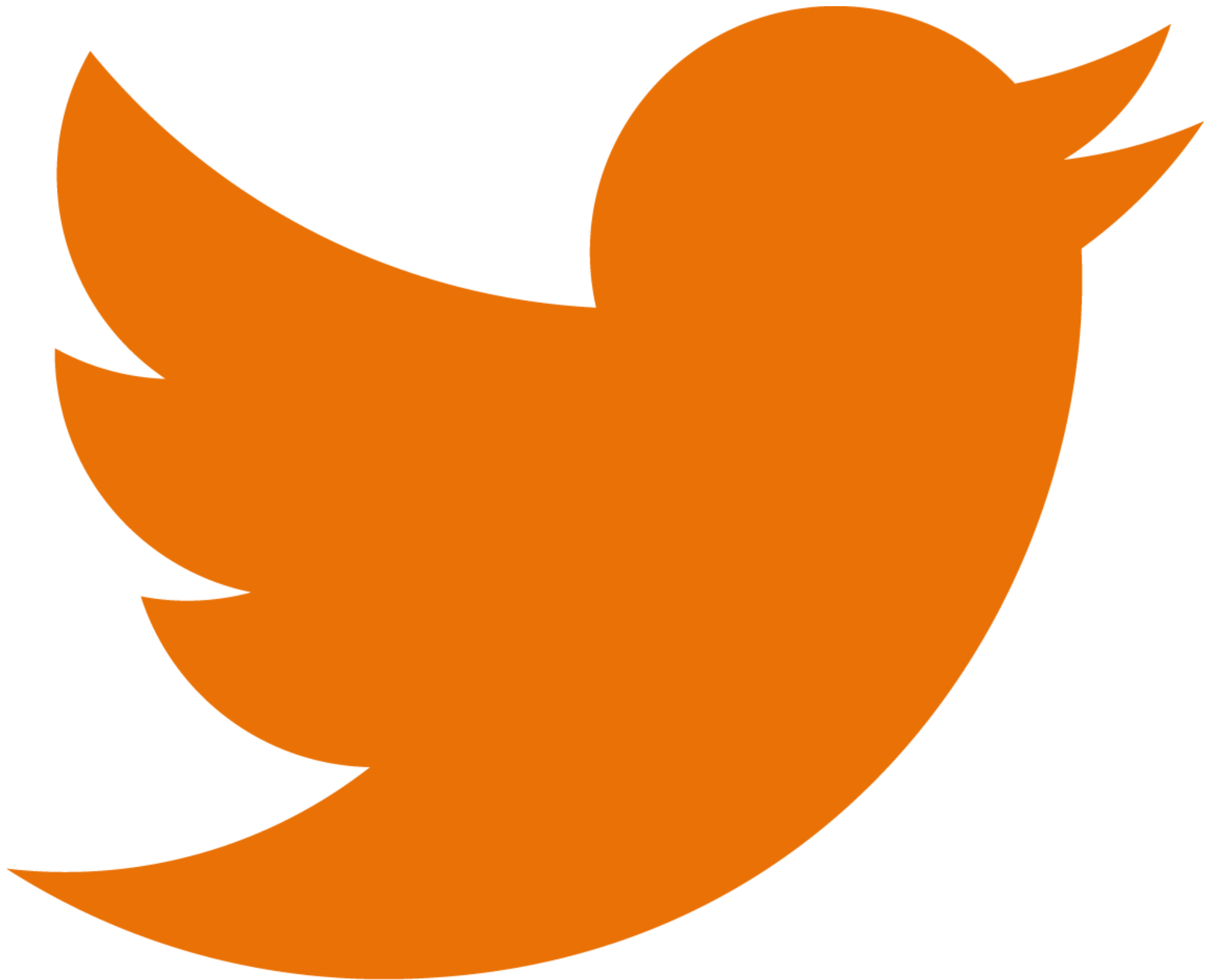
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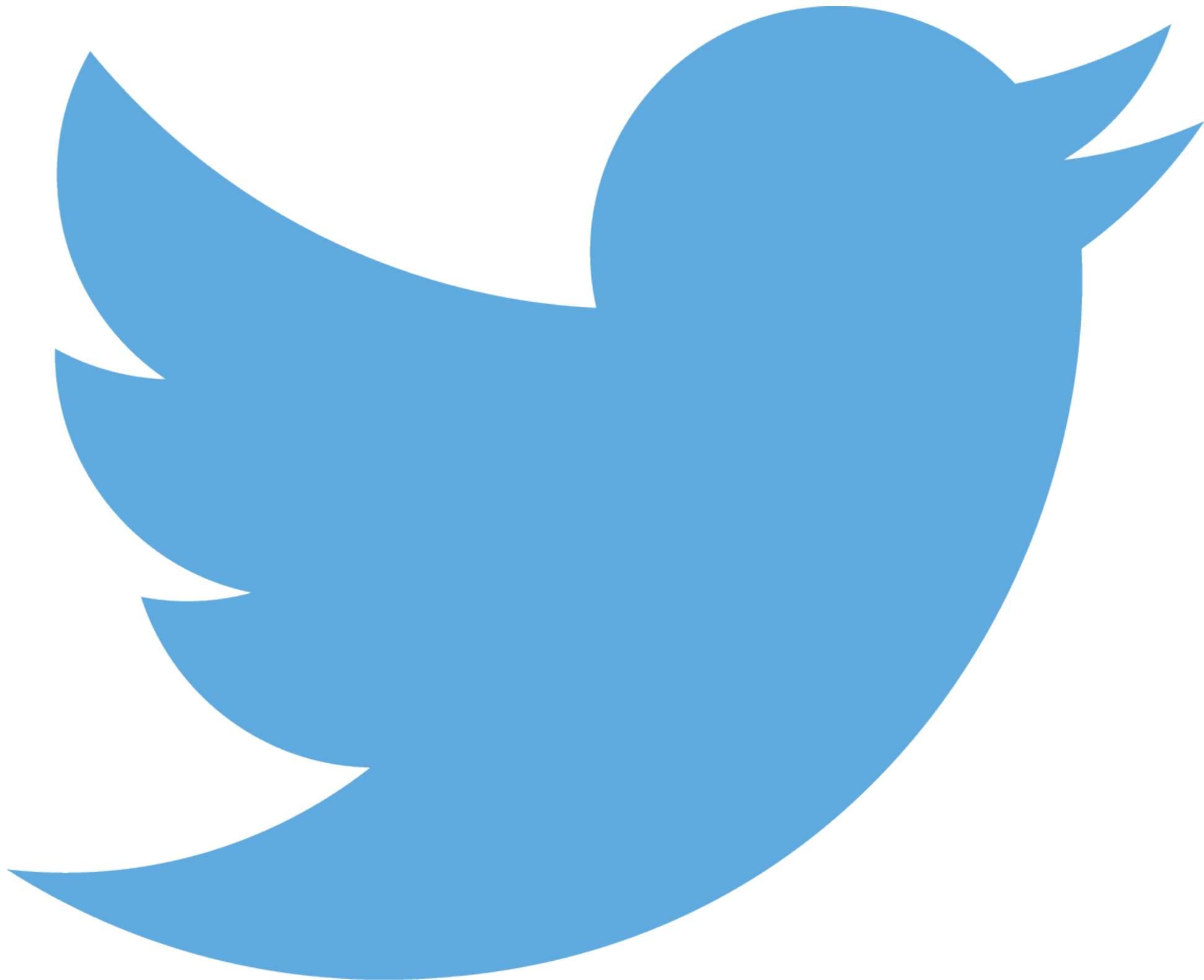




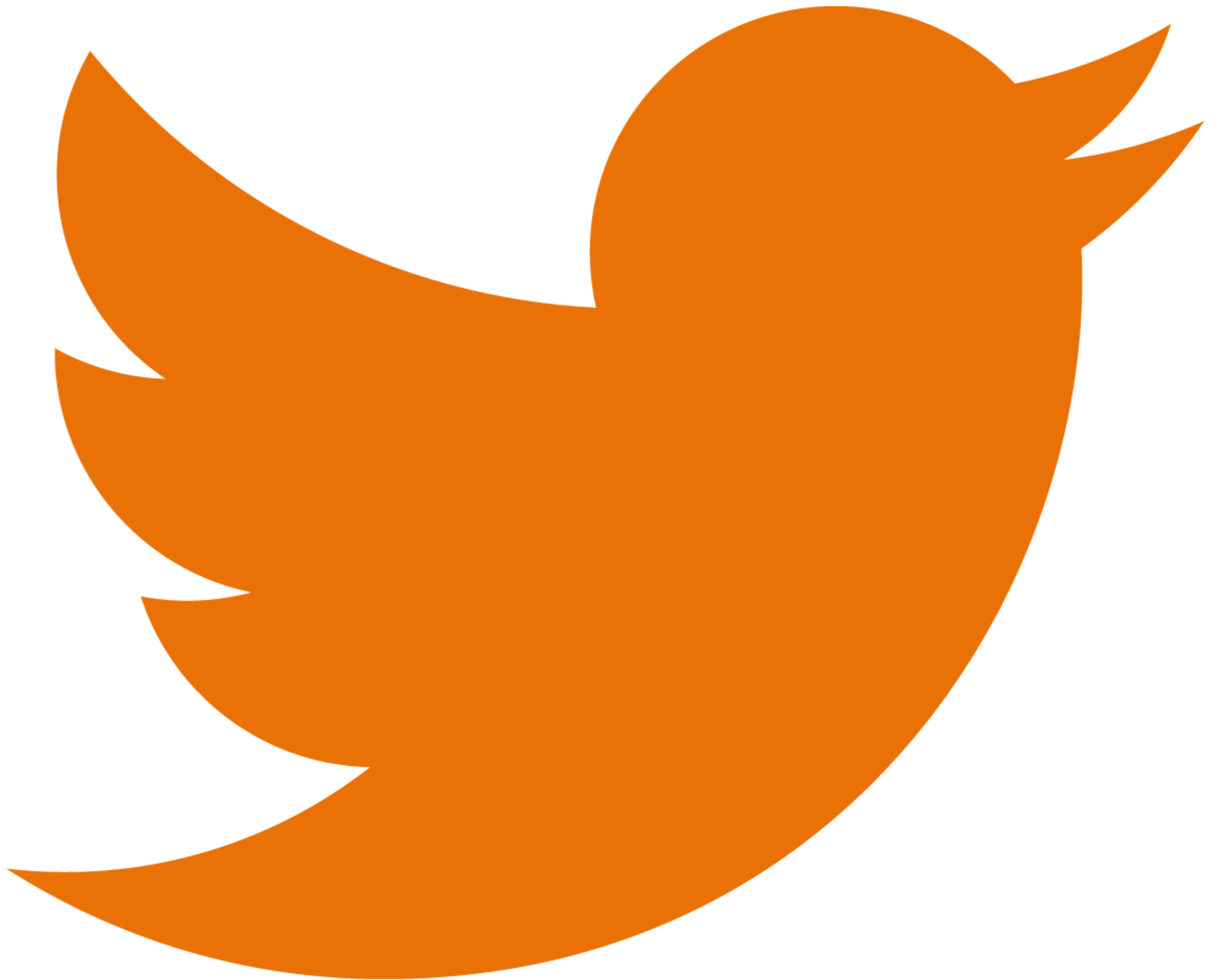
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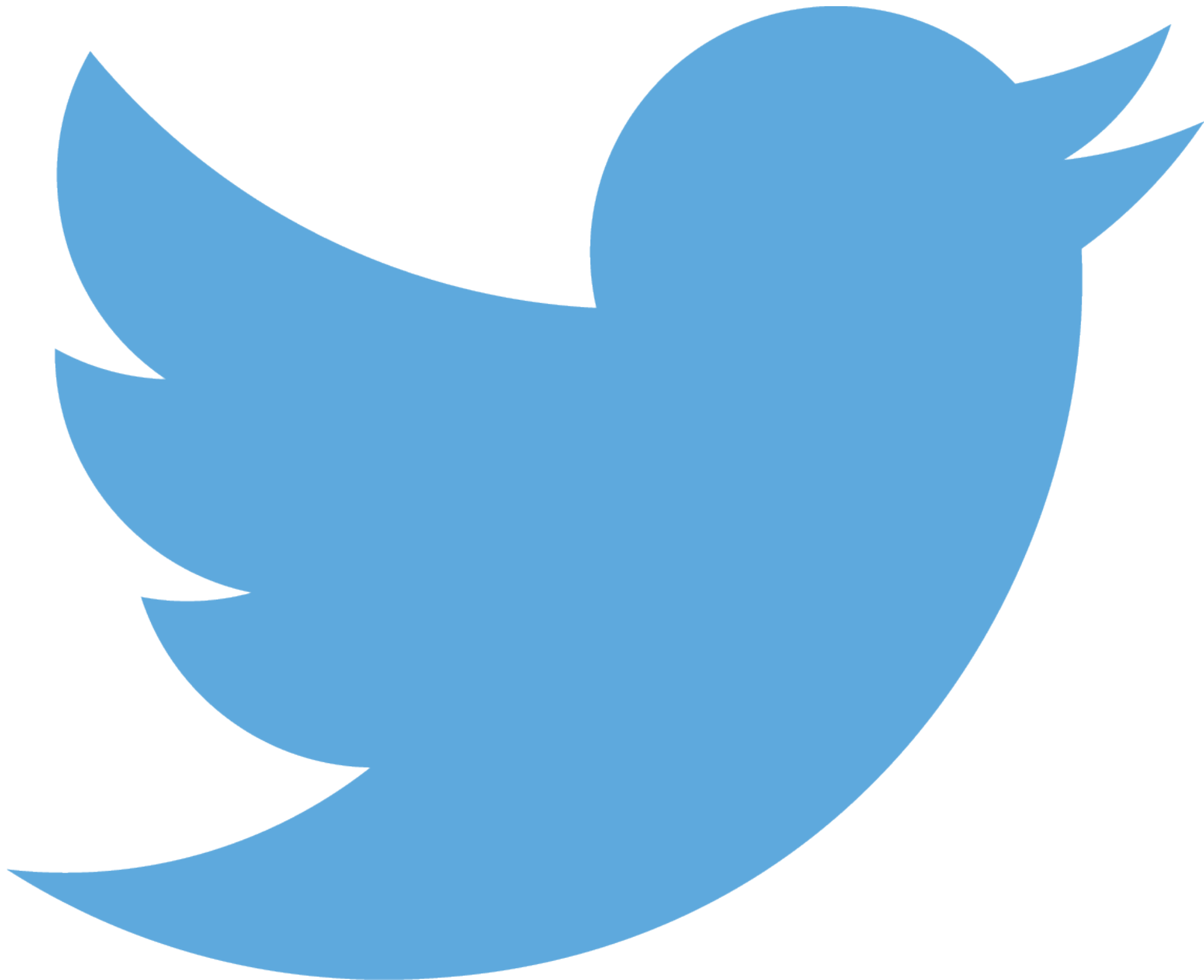


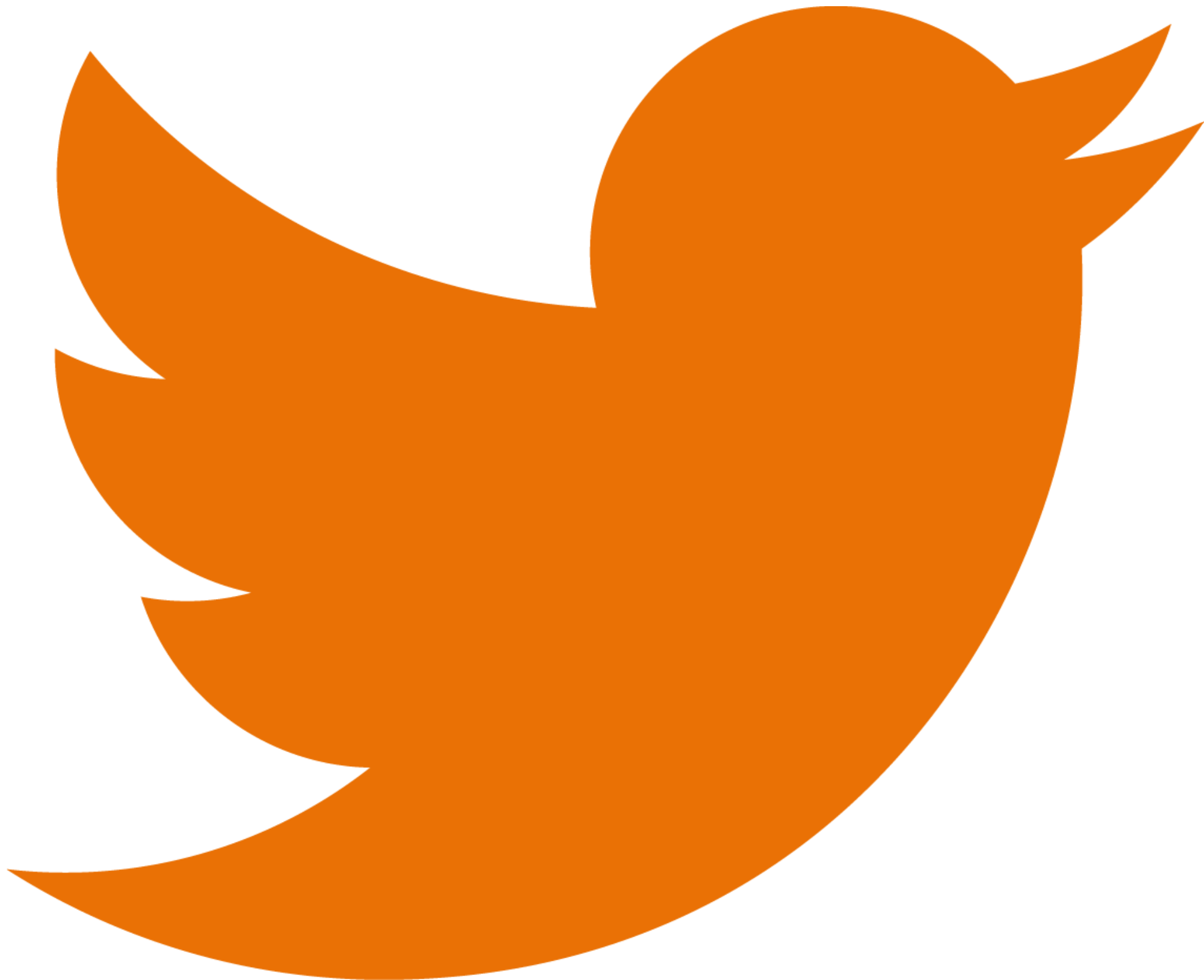




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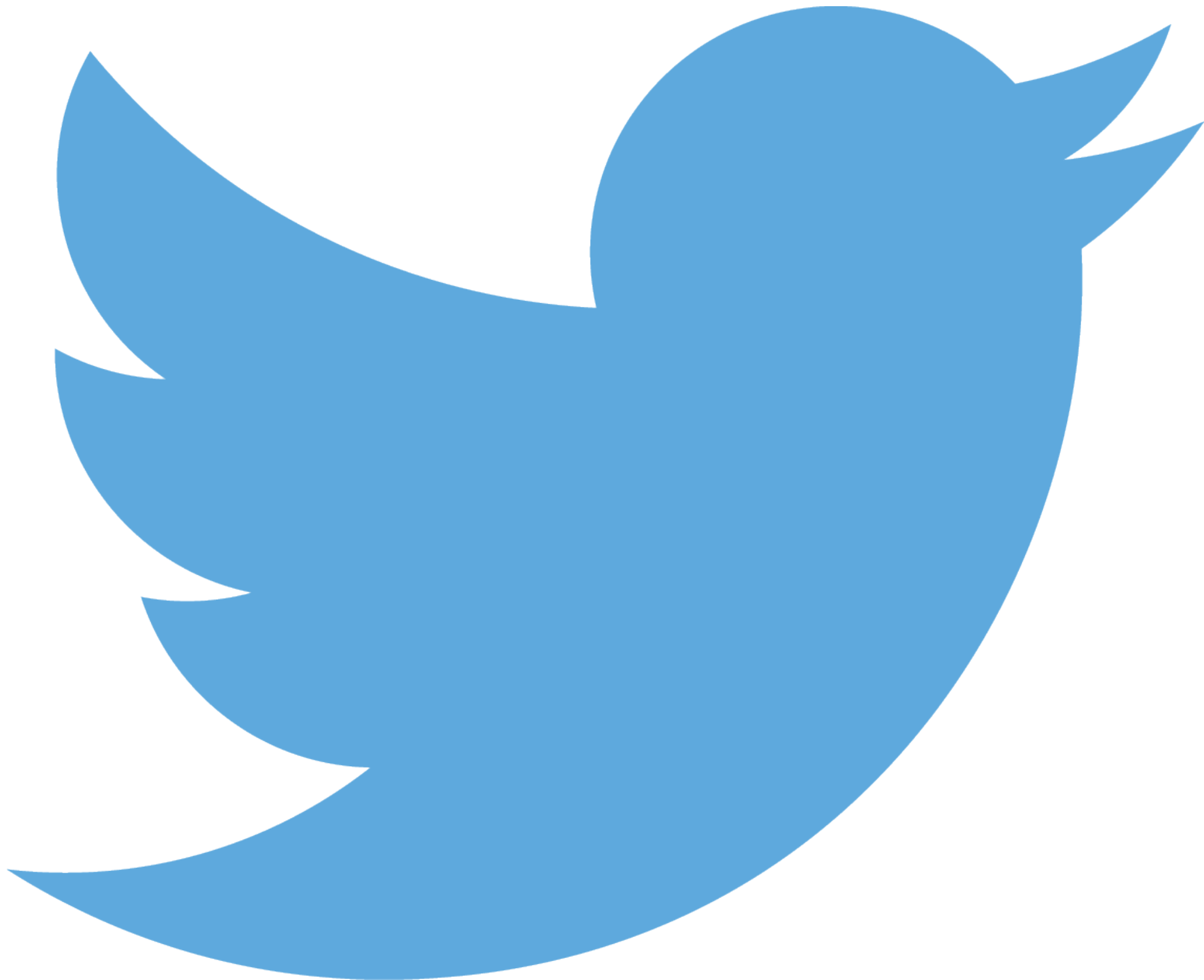


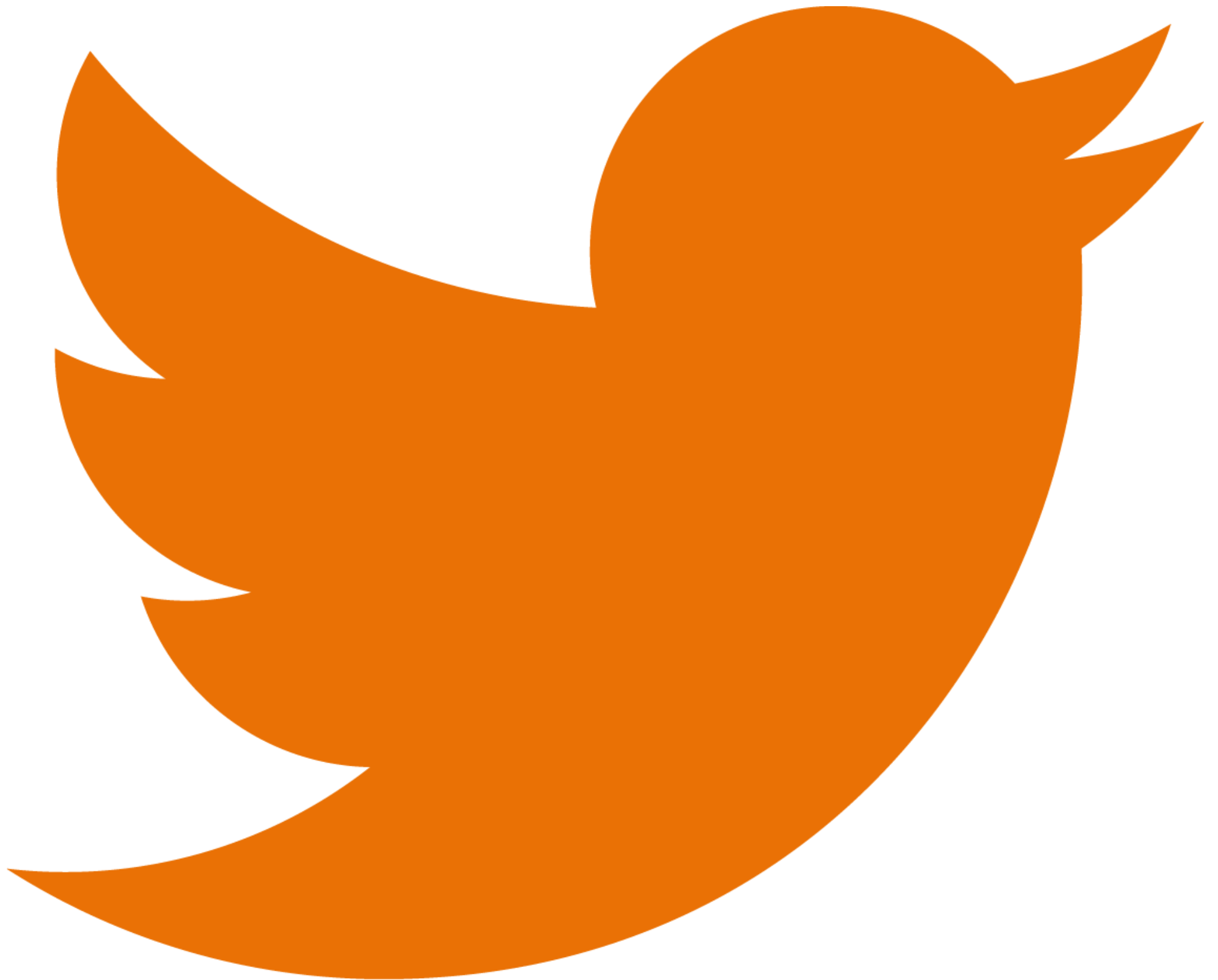


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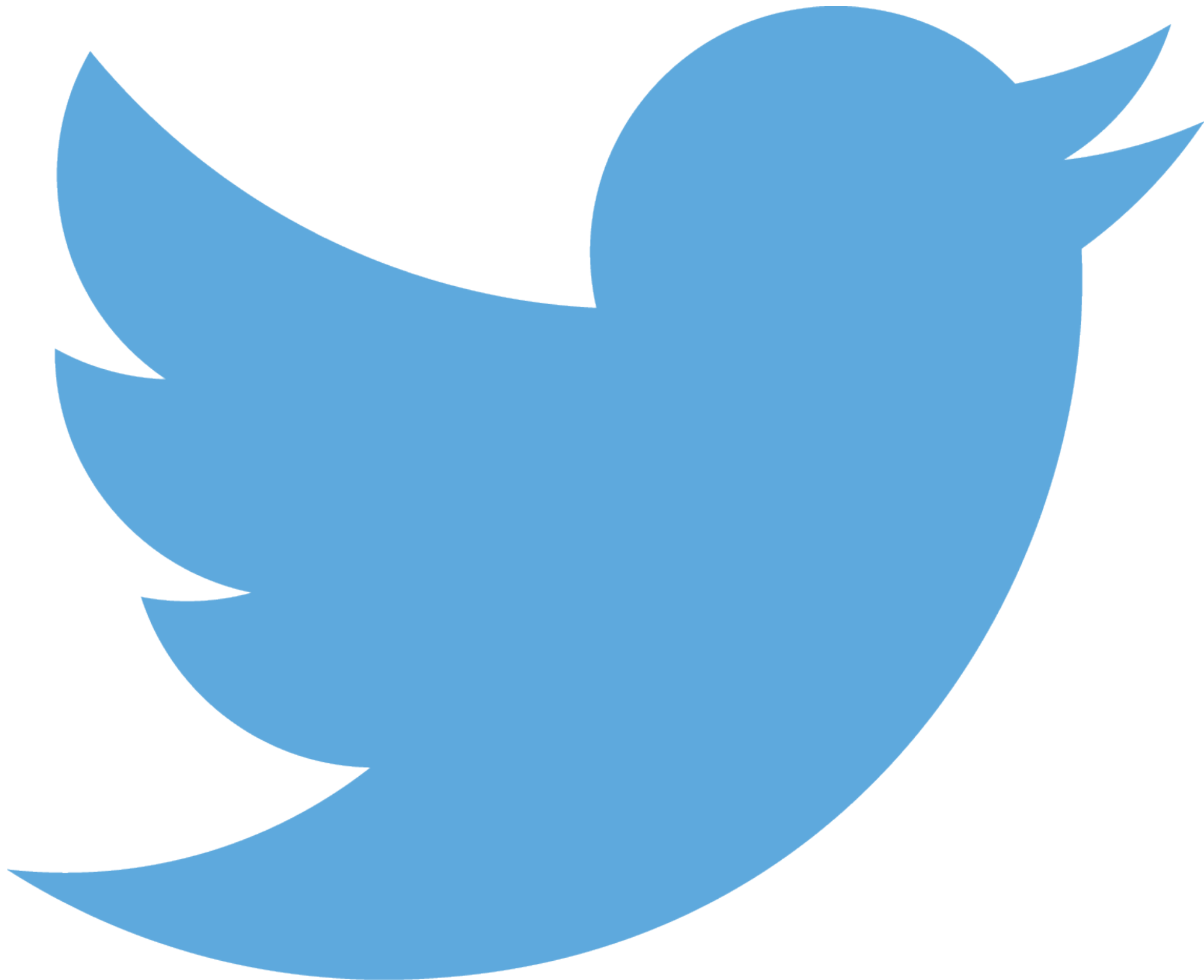


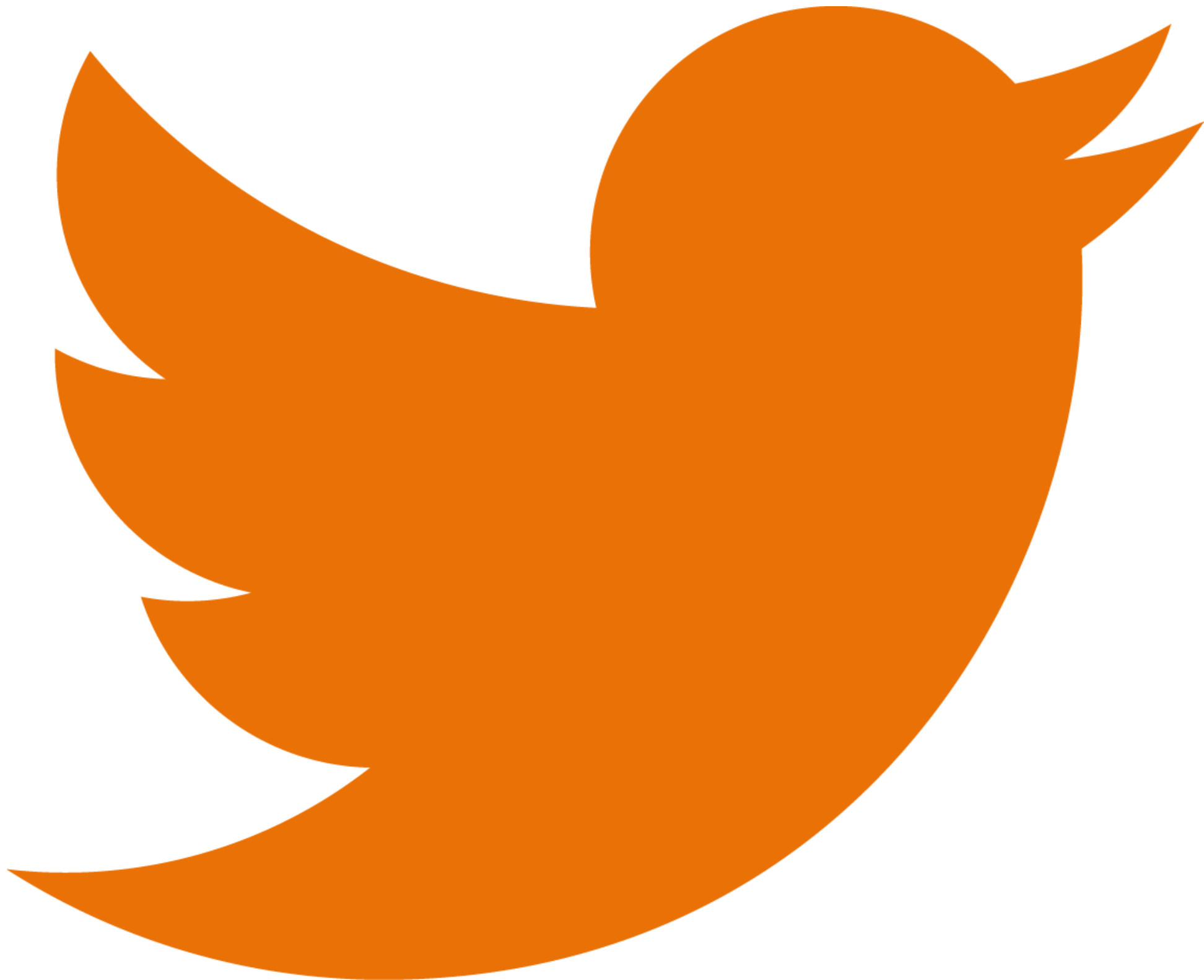


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